

Track and Field



Walking



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Endurance is Everything

Among members of the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF), walking is too often considered as a minor discipline, the province of a very few specialists. According to Article 191 of the IAAF, walking is progression on foot in such a way that the foot shall maintain uninterrupted contact with the ground. The rear foot may leave the ground only when the heel of the front foot has touched the same ground. Further, the leg which is about to touch the ground must remain extended until the moment when the other leg makes contact with the ground. Only the arms are allowed to move freely; the body must at all times remain in an upright position.

These are the constraints which bring a smile to the faces of skeptical on-lookers when they see the athletic walker – as opposed to the normal walker – moving past. The most popular walking races, and the ones where this strange style really comes into its own, are the long-distance events. The endurance walks, like the Paris to

Strasbourg race for example, reveal how much interest there is in walking as a sport. The walks most frequently included in international competitions are the 20 km and 50 km events.

The same rules apply to olympic competitions; short-distance events, such as used to form part of the program, were always marred by unpleasant incidents, particularly before the definition of "walking" was introduced. Competitors were forever accusing each other of having run in order to win. The British George E. Larner won two gold medals in the 1908 Games (3,500 m and 10 miles), but this discipline was taken out of the olympic program in 1928. Four years later it was back, but this time over a distance of 50 km which proved far more satisfactory. In 1948 the 10 km was introduced, but this once more led to problems. Then in 1956 the 10 km was replaced by the 20 km, whereas a distance of 100 km would doubtless have been preferable, and would have aroused great interest among athletic walkers.